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ABSTRACT

Apologies and restitutions in the repair attempts of 50 first-, fourth-, and seventh-grade, middle-class, rural girls were investigated to determine what children know about their social environment during a period of social growth and how that knowledge develops. Repair attempts, such as apologies and restitutions, occur when a rule or social convention is violated and a speaker must account for the violation. It was found that first graders used significantly more single apologies than fourth or seventh graders, regardless of whether the violation was serious or less serious or whether the victim was the child's mother or best friend. Fourth-graders used single restitutions, and seventh graders used restitutions in combination with other components of attempts to repair. The severity level of the violation affected the content of the seventh graders' repairs. It is concluded that the data show a link between two models of social explanations: Schadler and Ayers-Nachamkin's (1983) model of the precursors of excuse-making, which states that young children use apologies regardless of the particular events of a violation, and Schlenker and Darby's (1981) finding that adults' repair attempts depend on the intent and consequence of a violation. Repairs described in this study reveal development from precursors to adult patterns of repairs. (Author/RH)

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The Development of Apologies and Restitutions in Elementary-aged Children's Repair Attempts

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Abstract

As an index of social awareness, apologies and restitutions in first-, fourth-, and seventh-grade girls' repair attempts were investigated. First graders used significantly more single apologies than fourth or seventh graders, regardless of the severity of the violation (serious/less serious) or the victim (child's mother or bext friend). Fourth graders used single restitutions, and seventh graders used restitutions in combination with other repair components. The severity level of the violation affected the content of the seventh graders' repairs. These data show a link between two models of social explanations. Schadler and Ayers-Nachamkin's (1983) model for the precursors of excuse-making states that young children use apologies regardless of the particular events of a violation. Schlenker and Darby's (1981) study shows that adults' repair attempts depend on the intent and consequences of a violation. The repairs in this study show development from precursors to adult patterns of repairs.

Children adjust their communication to meet the demands of the social situation. By doing so, they reveal their knowledge of linguistic conventions and their social awarenesses. In recent years, speech adjustments associated with a number of different social contexts have been explored, such as the age, sex, role, relative status, and familiarity of the communicative partners (e.g., Ervin-Tripp & Gordon, 1986) and the social setting (e.g., Sachs & Devin, 1976). Request forms and politeness routines have been frequent topics, in part because alternations in these forms are particular sensitive to social context. However, few other linguistic conventions have been studied.

One linguistic convention closely tied to the social context is the use of apologies and restitutions as repair attempts. Repair attempts occur when a rule or social convention is violated and the speaker must account for the violation. While adults are skilled at manipulating repair attempts to meet the demands of the social situation (e.g., Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983), children must become adept at adjusting their repairs to the cues in their social environment. Effective use of repair attempts requires knowledge of social norms (and subsequent violations) and knowledge of which repair is appropriate for a particular violation. By examining the content of children's repair attempts during the elementary school years, it is possible to determine what children know about their social environment during a period of social growth and how that knowledge develops.

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Method

Subjects. Participants in this study were fifty girls, 15 in first grade, 17 in fourth grade, and 18 in seventh grade. The mean age for each grade level was 7;2 (years;months), 10;2, and 13;0 respectively. The children lived in a rural community in Northeastern Kansas that was mainly comprised of lower-middle-class and middle-class families. Because previous studies identified sex differences in children's excuses and moral development (e.g., Minick, 1984), all the children in this study were female. None had any identified problems with language or hearing.

Materials. Sixteen vignettes were used that described situations in which a child violates a social convention or moral standard while interacting with one other person. Each vignette ended with a question asking the child what she would say to the victim of the violation. The vignettes were based on four themes which were: 1) taking someone's property without asking, 2) lying to someone, 3) hurting someone, and 4) damaging/losing someone's property. For each theme there were four versions of the story that varied on two dimensions--the severity of the violation and the recipient of the explanation. On the severity dimension each violation was judged to be either serious or less serious by a group of college students doing research on excuses and a group of elementary and junior high school children. On the recipient dimension the explanations were to be directed to the child's parent or her best friend. Thus, there was a serious parent condition, a less serious parent condition, a serious friend condition, and a less serious friend condition for each

theme for a total of 16 vignettes. A sample set of vignettes based on one theme appears in Appendix A.

Procedure. Each child was interviewed individually by an experimenter in an empty room in the child's school. The sessions were audio-recorded. The experimenter initiated the session by asking each child her age, birth date, the name of her best friend, and by establishing who the child's regular caretaker was. The child was then asked some sample questions to get used to the role-playing procedure and to check the volume of the tape recorder. Next the child received directions indicating that she would hear some stories and then be asked some questions. She was told that all the stories would be about her and her mom (or regular caretaker) or about her and her best friend, _____, (the name provided by the child during the opening questions).

All vignettes were read to the children. The order of presentation was counter-balanced as to the recipient of the explanation and the severity of the violation. After the child heard the vignette she was asked how she would respond or what she would say in the described situation. Most children responded readily. For those who needed prompting, the question and violation were repeated (e.g., "What would you say to your mom if she found out you took her potato chips?"). For half the stories children explained the violations to their best friends and for the other half they explained them to their parent. When the interview was completed, each child was asked not to discuss the interview with her peers until all of them had a chance to

participate in the study.

Coding System. Repair attempts were categorized into apologies, excuses, restitutions, other repairs, no repair, and combinations of these. Of particular interest was the use of apologies, restitutions, and their combinations. Definitions of these categories are:

1. Apology--a simple apology; an apology plus a restatement of the violation in the form of "I'm sorry for..."
2. Restitution--an attempt to make amends for the violation that is comparable to the severity of the violation.
3. Apology/Restitution Combination--a repair attempt that contains both an apology element and a restitution element.

Examples of each kind of repair can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Explanations fell into two groups. Responses were either a single repair (i.e., fit into only one category) or two-part combinations (those that contained two repair components each of which fit into a category). A developmental trend of the use of apologies and restitutions was apparent. First graders used single apologies 44% of the time, whereas fourth and seventh graders used them 15% and 14%, respectively. According to the significant difference test of proportions (Bruning & Kintz, 1977), the first graders' use of single apologies was significantly more frequent than the fourth and seventh graders ($z = 7.25$, $p < .05$ and $z = 7.67$, $p < .05$, respectively). Likewise, fourth (21%) and seventh (16%) graders used significantly more restitutions than first graders (13%): $z = 4.99$, $p < .05$ and $z = 5.27$, $p < .05$, respectively.

Fourth graders relied on single restitutions rather than combinations as repair attempts (21% vs. 17%), whereas seventh graders used restitutions in combination with other repair components (23%) rather than as single repairs (16%).

Finally, it should be noted that the recipient of the repair (parent vs. friend) did not affect the use of apologies (24% vs. 23%) or restitutions (16% vs.16%). Severity level was a factor for the seventh-grade children. Significantly more apologies were used in less serious conditions ($z = 2.16$, $p < .05$), and restitutions were used to amend serious conditions.

Conclusions and Discussion

Two models can be used to interpret these data. First, Schadler and Ayers-Nachamkin (1983) explain that as a precursor to excuse-making, young children will offer an apology regardless of the nature of the violation. As the children get older, they begin to tailor their repairs to the specific violation. First graders' heavy use of apoligies demonstrates they are not yet discriminating among severity levels. Fourth and seventh graders' use of restitutions indicates that they do discriminate severity. Secondly, Schlenker and Darby (1981) found that adults use apologies and restitutions for different violations depending on intent and consequences. Seventh graders' repairs depended on the violation; simple apologies were used in less serious situations and restitutions were used in combination with another repair component for serious violations. The developmental trend is evidence of a link between two models that focus on separate ends of development.

First graders resembled the young children in Schadler and Ayers-Nachamkin's (1983) model. By offering apologies for all violations they were not attending to the cues in their social environment. Fourth graders were beginning to attend to severity as reflected by their use of single restitutions. Seventh graders were adept at utilizing social cues and adjusting their repair attempts as they deemed appropriate.

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Appendix A

Sample Set of Vignettes Based on the Theme of Taking Someone's Property

1. Serious Parent Condition

One day you wanted some money. Even though you knew you weren't supposed to, you took $5 from your mom's purse. Later she found out that you took her money. What would you say to her?

2. Less Serious Parent Condition

One day you were eating lunch at home and you took the potato chips you knew your mom was going to eat with her lunch. Your mom found our that you took her potato chips. What would you say to her?

3. Serious Friend Condition

One day you wanted some money. You knew _____ has $5 so you took it from her without asking. Later on she found out that you took her money. What would you say to her?

4. Less Serious Friend Condition

One day you were eating lunch with _____ and you took her potato chips. She found out about it. What would you say to her?

Appendix B

Examples of Coding System

1. Apology

"I'm sorry"
"Sorry for losing it"
"I'm sorry that I lied"
"Melanie, I'm sorry"

2. Restitution

"I'll pay you back"
"You can bump me with the door back"
"I'll bring you more chips tomorrow"
"Let me get you a band-aid"

3. Apology/Restitution Combination

"I'm sorry. I'll pay you back"
"I'm really sorry. If you have to go to the doctor I'll pay the for the bill"